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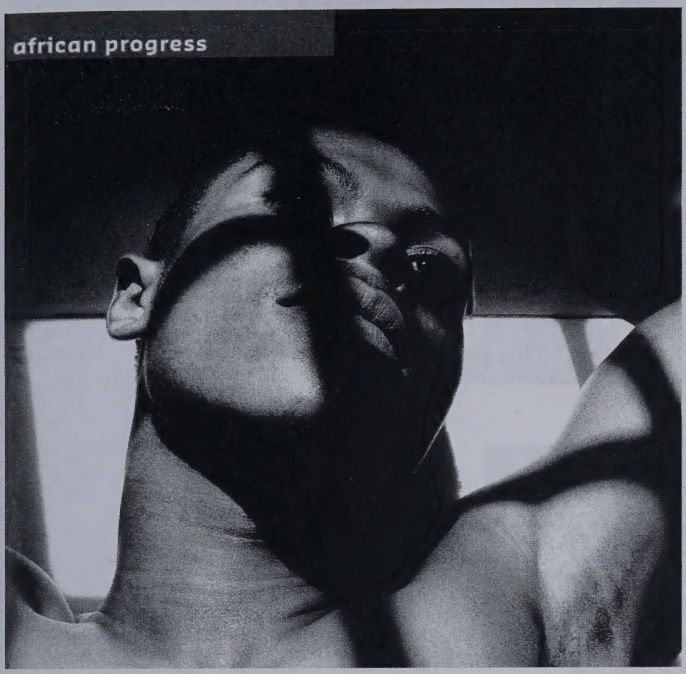

Gay Kenya

Writer Dan Allen talks to gay activists in the land of Barack Obama's father. They are working to change attitudes in a nation where most men who have sex with men won't use the "g" word. 27

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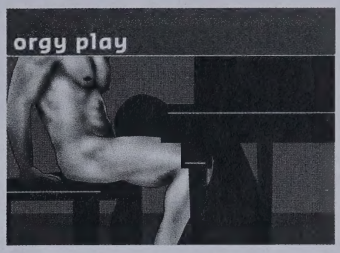
The story of gay Puritans

We know the Puritans as religious fanatics. But research shows that even in this repressive period, there was same-sex coupling and even challenges to the prevailing dogma. 23



Bare naked in a crowd

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GAY SEX IN KENYA

In the land of Barack Obama's father, most gays are not 'out' but activist groups are emerging

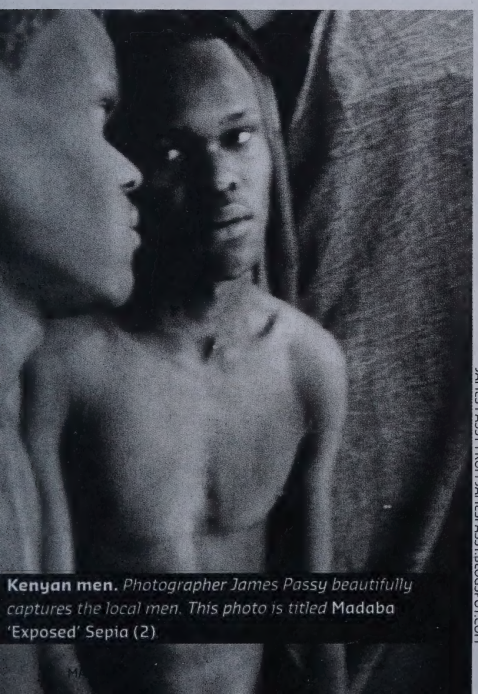
Dan Allen

It feels a bit odd to call Kenya a microcosm of Africa, as if this expansive and wondrous and magical land where humanity itself got its start could ever be considered anything in miniature. And yet microcosmic is exactly what Kenya is. Geographically, it packs in pretty much everything Earth can serve up, from mountains to beaches to rainforests to savannahs to deserts. Creature-wise, hundreds of different animal species (including the complete Big Five posse of buffalo, elephant, leopard, lion and rhino) call Kenya home, as do over a thousand bird types. And culturally speaking, settlers from around the continent and across the seas have long melded with indigenous tribes here in relative harmony.

And yes, even the shape of Kenya's same-sex loving scene makes it something of a continental microcosm. While they may still be a long way from the freedoms of South Africa (where marriage equality became law in 2006), queers in this nation of 38 million aren't nearly as repressed as in most adjacent countries — say in next door Uganda, where a mere homosexual act can get one thrown in prison for life.

"Kenya has always been a safe haven for neighboring LGBTI people when they face persecutions and witch hunting in their countries," says Lourence Misedah, program director for Ishtar, a Nairobi-based organization promoting sexual health for Kenyan men who have sex with men (MSM).

As it is in most of Africa, homosexuality between consenting adults is still officially illegal in Kenya (carrying a potential prison sentence of anywhere from five to 14 years), but the laws are rarely enforced and these days serve mostly as simple (but powerful) demoralizing mechanisms. Undeniably, much prejudice and even danger still lurk for today's gay Kenyans. But the grassroots organizing and activism that's taken shape within its nascent gay community over the last few years is nothing short of remarkable. Thanks to the work of a handful of young freedom fighters (with the assistance of the Ford Foundation, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and others), Kenya is securing its place as a beacon of hope for gays and lesbians throughout East Africa and beyond.



Kenyan men. *Photographer James Passy beautifully captures the local men. This photo is titled* Madaba 'Exposed' Sepia (2).

JAMES PASSY FROM JAMESPASSY.BLOGSPOT.COM

Only a decade ago, this would have been unthinkable. In 1998, Kenya's long-serving and much-beloved president Daniel arap Moi called homosexuality a "scourge" and "against African norms and traditions." And he declared outright that "Kenya has no room for homosexuals and lesbians." Despite recent advances, it's a sentiment still echoed by much of the populace in this deeply religious country, where same-sex love is often seen as an outside custom brought in by exploiting colonial powers. (Never mind that certain other outside customs are heartily embraced: About three-quarters of Kenya's population is Christian, another 10 percent Muslim.)

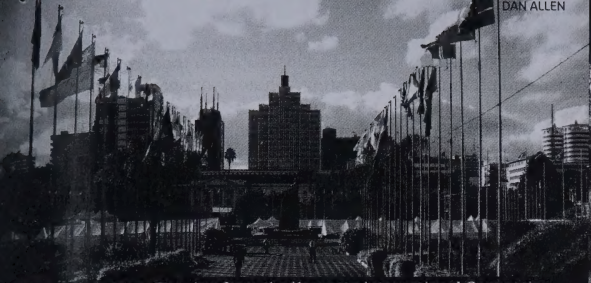
"Kenya is a patriarchal and heteronormative society," says Angus Parkinson, a British-born HIV and sexuality specialist who's called Kenya home for the last six years, and has been one of the key players in the development of its activist scene. "Religion, both Islam and Christianity, are deeply entrenched, and as a general rule the many local ethnic cultures are intolerant of homosexuality and indeed anything that upsets the very fixed notions of gender and gender performance."

As a result, the great majority of Kenyan men who have sex with men (MSM) still marry women and father children, while getting their real kicks elsewhere. "You need to understand that the whole notion of being 'out' is very Western," says Parkinson. "In a society where sexuality is discussed in very limited and narrow terms — and never personally in a public sense — being out is antithetical to how the culture does personal sexuality discourse."

At least to label-loving Western eyes, Kenya's current male queer scene — if it's seen at all — appears as a patchwork of MSM, MSW (male sex workers), and a very small but perhaps growing number who identify as gay. "The only openly gay and lesbian Kenyans I know are those involved in rights activism, and I can count them on both hands," says Parkinson. "The cost of being out is too great — loss of family, friends, housing, job, career, and social status, coupled with the risk of violence, verbal and physical assault, etc, etc, means that the majority of [gay] folks lead socially hetero-normative lives but find discrete ways to meet their sexual needs."

One method is via prostitution, which Parkinson says is a big part of Kenyan MSM culture. "But the vast majority of 'customers' are not tourists," he hastens to add. "They are local Kenyan men."

For those who can weather the huge risks of being seen, certain big-city bars — most famously Gypsy in Nairobi — can develop reputations for being what Westerners would call "gay-friendly,"


DAN ALLEN

Nairobi modern. *The view from the Kenyatta International Convention Center shows the modern world capital that is Nairobi, one that might surprise Kenya founder Jomo Kenyatta (seated statue at center), who in 1938 wrote that "there is no African word for homosexuality."*

DAN ALLEN

Both in traditional garb. *The author with the charming and 6'6" Sammy, everyone's favorite Maasai at Amboseli Sopa Lodge.*

DAN ALLEN

Bidding adumu. *Maasai tribesmen perform a traditional adamu welcome dance at the Amboseli Sopa Lodge.*

DAN ALLEN

Pachyderm crossing. *An elephant family on its way back home to the Kilimanjaro foothills after a nice day at the mud bath in Amboseli National Park.*

The first-time Kenya experience

Friendly, bustling and insistently modern, Nairobi is the entry point for the vast majority of visitors to Kenya. For many Westerners, it's their first taste of Africa, and the sight of the teeming masses of people on the road from the airport to downtown — walking to their destinations because even a ride in one of the omnipresent overcrowded shared vans is too costly — is immediately humbling.

It's easy to forget once inside Nairobi's gleaming city center, with its tranquil upscale hotels and services sheltering tourists from most hints of the poverty that lurks beyond in this country where unemployment averages about 40 percent. But it's seen again on the way out of town to safari, where it seems the further away from downtown, the more hard-scrabble become people's lots. Still, their unflappable resilience shines through, and even the poorest keep on keeping on in the uncomplaining Kenyan way.

And then out of the blue, something magical happens. There's no sign to mark the place, but somewhere along the way the city's outer fringes simply melt into the countryside, and while the people here may have no more — and indeed quite possibly far less — than their city cousins, there's a profound peace to them. You see it in the proud tribesman tending a lone goat in the pasture. Suddenly everything seems deeply connected in a way it hadn't a minute ago, or maybe ever before.

And then suddenly you see them: Animals. Many, many animals. And then more animals. You feel like a zoo has exploded, and you are astonished to realize that only the spectacular Kenyan scenery separates these amazing animals and you. And as obvious as it sounds, you realize that this was how it used to be.

— Dan Allen

but these are subject to the changing whims of venue owners. "Tacos Bar used to be the place just like Gypsy's was, but then since they are not gay bars, they became homophobic," says Misedah. "Most people have opted to keep off from them, apart from a few people who still go there." In Mombasa, mostly-straight discos Florida and Tembo are among the current gay hangouts of choice. "There's a comfort level in both clubs," reports Tasneem Adamji, owner of African Quest Safaris, a gay-friendly Kenya-based tour operator.

As these things go the world over, Kenya's strongest homo contingents are in its largest cities, the capital Nairobi (about 3 million people) and coastal Mombasa (about 700,000), though the latter has experienced more concentrated homophobia of late. "I think the biggest difference is the active presence of Islam on the coast," says Parkinson. "Whereas the religious homophobic hate speech in Nairobi is largely limited to rhetoric, the Council of Imams and Preachers on the coast have been active in exercising their moronic hatred," says Parkinson. "There is »

» more tolerance in Nairobi," agrees Misedah.

Kenya's third biggest city, Kisumu, and its oldest town, Lamu, are two other locales where gay presences bubble beneath the surface, however silently. "The gay communities in other places are highly discreet, but operate in buddy groups where they meet other gay men and hang out," says Misedah. Even in the larger cities, social networks play an important role in the fabric of Kenyan gay life, since meeting at each other's homes is safer than meeting in bars.

Few would argue though that the safest gay ground in Kenya today is the recently opened GALCK (Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya) Resource Center in Nairobi. An umbrella union of Kenya's four main advocacy groups, GALCK debuted in 2006 and helmed the popular and pioneering "Q Spot" at that year's World Social Forum in Nairobi. The first designated GLBT safe space in Kenya, the Q Spot showcased queer art and performance, and also offered support, counseling and HIV testing.

This being Africa, the threat of HIV/AIDS is even more real and present for same-sex loving individuals here than it is elsewhere. "Poverty and the performance of sexuality cannot be separated," says Parkinson, who adds that much Kenyan homosex necessarily happens on the fly in cheap hotels and the backs of cars. "If you have no place safe and private to have sex, then the sex you're having is probably hurried, un-negotiated and unsafe. Throw in culture, religion, and the criminalization of sex between men, and you have a great recipe for fueling HIV."

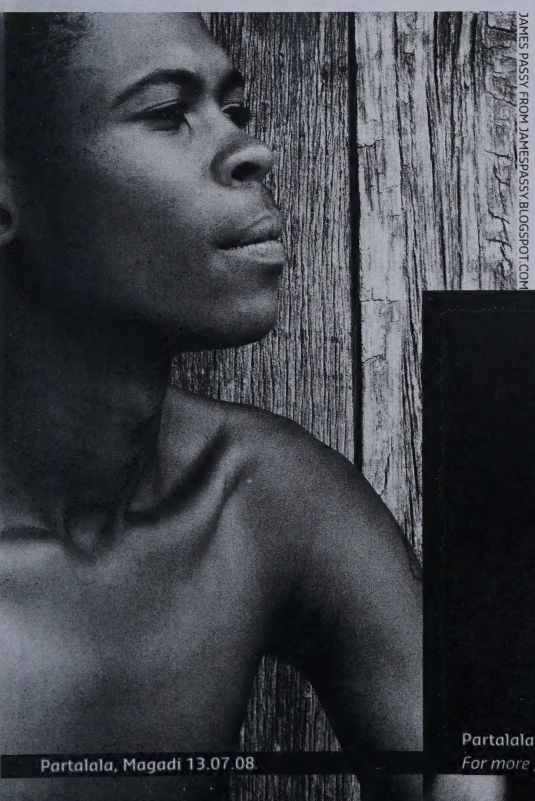
For the tourist, negotiating Kenya's largely underground — or at least certainly very understated — same-sex scene requires a fair amount of wits and a hefty dose of discretion. "It's widely understood that Kenyans will not appreciate, whilst some may tolerate it, any open display of sexual overtures," says Adamji. "This stands true even for heterosexuals. We live around age-old cultures with communities that are often rural and conservative, and so this respect is inbred in us from childhood."

Faulty gaydar could therefore obviously lead to disastrous consequences, and even the best perceptive skills can result in precarious situations. "If you're a white tourist looking to pay for sex, there are multiple opportunities and probably lots of risks," says Parkinson. "A common experience is a 'sting,' where a younger guy will hook a white man, take him to a hotel room, and the police will 'surprise' them — though the aim is a large bribe rather than an official charge."

Ironically, a recent article in The Standard, one of Kenya's most popular dailies, pointed to the increased visibility of male sex workers as a positive sign of gay acceptance. "There was a time when homosexuality was discussed in hushed tones and a male prostitute was regarded as the devil incarnate in Kenya," says the article, entitled Homosexuals Leave the Closet. "Today they have grown bold and even approach prospective clients, flirting with men in broad daylight in the streets of Nairobi." However skewed the article's premise — that homosexuality and prostitution are one and the same — may be, it's a sign of the times that a not-completely-condemnatory article would even appear in Kenya's oldest newspaper.

More balanced and far more groundbreaking, homosexuality was openly discussed for the first time ever on Kenyan TV (on the human rights talk show Hatua) in August 2008, with Misedah serving as one of the panelists. A small step perhaps, but another strong indicator of a more open dialogue and a brighter future ahead for Kenya's gay community.

Pleased as he is with the direction things seem to be going, Misedah's a realist. "It's never easy being gay," he posits, "not even in the most liberal societies."



JAMES PASSY FROM JAMESPASSY.BLOGSPOT.COM

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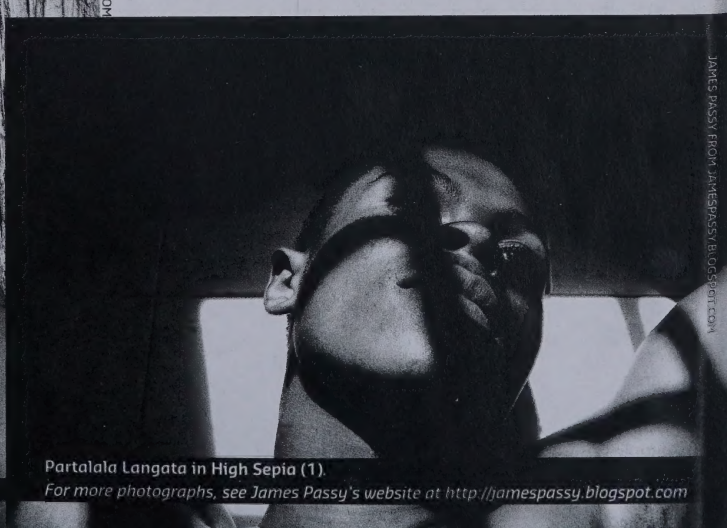

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Partalala Langata in High Sepia (1).

For more photographs, see James Passy's website at http://jamespassy.blogspot.com